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NSC FOR MARCHESE/DORAN/ABRAMS; DEPT FOR NEA/ELA SONTY,
NEA/PI PATTON, AND DRL/NESCA BARGHOUT

E.O. 12958: DECL: 5/25/2017
TAGS: [FR](#) [LE](#) [SY](#) [PREL](#)
SUBJECT: STAYING IN SYNCH WITH FRANCE ON SYRIA

REF: STATE 71071

Classified By: Political Minister-Counselor Josiah Rosenblatt, reasons
1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (U) This is an action request; see para 9.

12. (C) Summary: FM Kouchner's May 24 comments in Beirut have fed speculation here that France is on the verge of revising its policy toward Syria. While the French position remains somewhat murky (Kouchner appeared to walk back his comments on May 25), Saad Hariri's representative in Paris is urging that the U.S. intervene with NSA-equivalent Jean-David Levitte to shape -- and, hopefully, to limit -- any French engagement with Damascus. End summary.

Rampant Press Speculation

13. (C) A possible revision in France's dealings with Syria may be developing even more quickly than anticipated. Foreign Minister Kouchner, speaking in Beirut on May 24, told reporters that one must talk to one's enemies when searching for peace. He also indicated that France would talk with "all the components" of Lebanese society -- a clear reference to Hizballah. Kouchner's comments were prominently reported by today's Le Figaro, and were discussed at length in a televised morning news program hosted by Bernard Guetta. Guetta predicted that the only major difference between Sarkozy's policy in the Levant and that of former President Chirac would be that Sarkozy would renew talks with Syria. By mid-morning, Al-Hayat bureau chief Randa Takieddine was frantically calling the Presidency (and Embassy Paris) seeking confirmation of "the change in French policy" and asking whether President Bush would discuss Syria with Sarkozy at the G-8 summit.

14. (C) Perhaps in response to the media attention his comments generated, Kouchner appeared to walk back his remarks in a telephone interview on May 25. Kouchner told Reuters that France was ready to talk to all those in favor of Lebanon's unity, autonomy, and territorial integrity, but that France "very clearly" had no need to talk to Syria as others did. However, Kouchner further obfuscated France's position by adding that "if circumstances permit" then France could "open up" (to talks with Damascus).

Basile Yared Concerned

15. (C) Over breakfast May 25 with NEA Watcher, Basile Yared, Saad Hariri's representative in Paris, expressed unease about the possibility of talks between Paris and Damascus. Yared

said the idea of entering into a dialogue with Damascus was being pushed by Sarkozy's Middle East advisor, Boris Boillon, who Yared described as "still being in campaign mode" and looking to distinguish Sarkozy's foreign policy approach from that of former President Chirac. Yared fretted that even a non-substantive dialogue would "send a political signal" that would seriously undermine the position of the March 14 majority and would reverse much of what Chirac had achieved. Noting with approval that the Secretary had reportedly limited her discussions with FM Muallim to the subject of Iraq, Yared asked that the USG, both here and in Washington, encourage NSA-equivalent Jean-David Levitte to likewise put strict limits on the scope of any talks with the Syrian regime.

"Who, Us Talk to the Syrians?" Says Quai

¶6. (C) During a May 24 meeting with Jean-Christophe Auge, the MFA's Syria desk officer, Auge denied that the French Ambassador in Damascus had already sent in a cable enumerating the reasons why France should re-engage with Syria. (According to Yared, the ambassador's cable was prompted by a meeting with FM Muallim, whose message was: "Now that Chirac is gone, we should talk.") To the contrary, Auge claimed that there was some institutional discomfort at the Quai with immediately launching a dialogue that would appear to reward Damascus for having waited out the Chirac presidency (the MFA was particularly repulsed by Farouk al-Shara's statement in early March to the effect of "we'll send a new ambassador to Paris once you have a new President"). On the other hand, Auge noted that Sarkozy is styling himself as "a man of dialogue" in both domestic and foreign affairs. "If we do talk to the Syrians, we think it

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will be important to be direct and frank with them. They know our message: Syria needs to comply with all the UNSCRs on Lebanon. The ball is in Syria's court," Auge summarized.

¶7. (C) Auge promised to convey the points of our reftel demarche on Syria's sham presidential referendum, but offered no substantive comment. However, when asked about the referendum, the Quai spokesperson said on May 28 that he had "no comment on this internal consultation." We protested the spokesperson's remarks to Auge on May 29 and encouraged the MFA to issue a clarification criticizing the referendum; Auge was non-committal, and mumbled that it might be difficult to clear such a statement due to a personnel shortage in the MFA's Middle East directorate.

¶8. (C) Meanwhile, we understand from Takieddine that the Syrian Ambassador to London, Dr. Sami Khiyami, has been tapped to be appointed to France, and that he is currently in Paris while awaiting his appointment to be announced.

¶9. (C) Comment/Action Request: While an exploration of the possibilities for Franco-Syrian talks was not unexpected, the rate at which the idea is gathering momentum suggests that we should engage with Sarkozy's team sooner, rather than later, to ensure that we remain coordinated in both substance and appearance. We suggest reinforcing the following points with the GoF at every opportunity in the coming weeks:

- We want to maintain our excellent cooperation on Syria policy;
- We will keep you apprised of our discussions with Syria on Iraq;
- Please keep us informed of your own plans with regard to Damascus;
- SARG's instinct remains to pocket any gesture while giving nothing in return;
- We must counter Lebanese fears of a US/French "grand bargain" with Syria;
- Syria's goal will be to drive wedge between us. Our goal

should be to keep the heat on Damascus to produce a change in behavior.

Post requests Department's concurrence on these points, along with any further guidance on either the substance or intensity of our engagement with the MFA and Elysee on Syria policy.

Please visit Paris' Classified Website at:
<http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/eur/paris/index.cfm>

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